Final Paper: Zuihitsu

Due Date: Any time during Finals Week, no later than Wednesday at 4 p.m.

Introduction to the Form

The zuihitsu is a literary form with a fascinating history. The first zuihitsu was written by Sei Shonagon, a court attendant to Japanese Empress Sadako/Teshi over a thousand years ago. Her zuihitsu, called The Pillow Book because she literally made a pillow out of a pile of notebooks in which she wrote, was akin to a journal. It contained memories, musings, segments of other’s texts, lists, opinions, dreams, and poetry. For example, there are sections titled “Hateful Things,” “Things That Arrest Me About a Lover’s Face,” “Nature Descriptions,” “Women and High Office,” “Different Kinds of Winds,” etc.

A different though related Japanese form is the haibun. The haibun was often viewed as a piece of writing that would accompany one on a journey. It contained sections of journaling, impressions, memories—whatever came up for the writer along the way—interrupted by haiku, the deceptively simple poem composed of three lines, the first in 5 syllables, the second in 7 syllables, the third in 5 syllables. The haiku would crystallize, perhaps, the more discursive text that came before it.

The zuihitsu and the haibun share the notion that the writing mind can “follow the brush”—that writing can lead you, rather than you leading it. Sometimes our writing knows more than we do. And they share a flowing, associative structure and style.
Your Paper

Your paper will represent a marriage between the zuihitsu and the haibun. Given that this seminar represents a journey, and you have hopefully been journaling, it will chart your progression along the path, down the road, up and down the mountain. It will also contain quotations or segments of other texts, both those we’ve read in class and some you have read or will read outside of class. You can also include haiku between sections if you’d like. Here are the specifics:

Form

- Title the paper whatever you like, and frame it in whatever way works best for your experience of what we’ve created this quarter, but do give it a title.
- The paper should be double-spaced. It is difficult to give a length, because what you do with it will determine its length. Still, I’d say it couldn’t be shorter than 8 double-spaced pages.
- When citations are required, use MLA citation style. This is very important. This will include a Works Cited page at the end of the paper. Please look up MLA style and follow it to a T, including page numbering, how and where you place your name on the paper, how you cite sources within the text and how you compose the Works Cited page.

Content

- You should use sections of your journal, woven throughout the zuihitsu, as part of the paper’s text.
- You can write segments of prose, and segments of poetry.
- You can write sections of memories and impressions from visitors who have joined us. You can quote our visitors’ work directly in the zuihitsu. Remember to cite sources.
- You can write sections, like Sei Shonagon did, which are lists. You can determine the content of these lists.
- You can compose poetry assignments you’d like to try out yourself, or you’d like to try out with your outreach community, or you’d like to use someday with a particular group of people.
- You should describe your experience when you do your writing outreach experience. Create that description any way you’d like.
- You can do character sketches of people in class, or things people said you don’t want to forget…
- You can make a list of memories you want to hold onto from the last ten weeks, and memories you’d like to set free.
- Please weave in information from ONE outside source, whether it be on the uses of poetry or writing in the setting you’ll be doing your writing experience within, or more philosophical writing on the uses of poetry in community, or….And be sure to cite this source according to MLA style.

In other words, you can construct this zuihitsu any way you like. Just write it in sections, use your journal entries, and keep the writing lively. And use MLA style.
The zuihitsu, spatial in every way, differs from the nikki, a "poetic diary" which differs from the Western -- that is, differs from documenting fact unless we mean an emotional fact. Differs from what is really true.

Translated at running brush, I love the way the zuihitsu runs with the content.

But even with a hint of narrative, the form also relies on sensibility and spatiality -- and a way to identify with the most important writers in the world, who happened to be Japanese women. I love them.

Like some teas? she asks. Or drinking your usual? I smile and reply, the usual -- but I do like the tease. She grins back.

I love the unabashed first person -- it almost risks the confessional quality that a diary exudes, or that diary-like information can contain in a conventional poetic form. Even the tone becomes altered by the form.

(What is true here?)

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I return home after rewriting a short story. Peel off a sweaty unitard. Shower and slip on a velvet skirt and loose cotton top. I sit at my computer to see where the words have taken the heart. The brain enters now.

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From Ki no Tsurayuki we know that kokoro and kotoba combine as the basic dynamic in Japanese poetics: the heart and the words produce passion, even if subtly placed.

*

On my way to Harvey's book party I stop by the cafe for a takeout decaf. It's evening. Cicely remarks from a table of girls where she's hanging now, off hours. You're confusing me, she continues. I smile and reply, Sweet.
From confusion to clarity. From clarity to ambiguities, blurs, fuzziness. Haze.

In her *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asks, *How does language construct the categories of sex? Does “the feminine” resist representation within language? Within a language of presumptive heterosexuality, what sorts of continuities are assumed to exist among sex, gender, and desire? Are these terms discrete?*

I am wired from Cicely’s caffeine-mixed decaf.

*Otherwise -- what?*

*Maybe I am attracted to this elegant mongrel because it blurs categories: those "grade B" forms of the Western canon: letters, diaries -- even gossip. Plus lists, fiction, criticism, online sites. I love blurs. I appreciate categories but as I grow older, have less of a need for the absolutes I sought in my twenties. The form suits this desire to blur.*